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## Newsletter



### INTERACTIVE WHITEBOARDS June 2006

A hot topic at the moment in the teaching profession – judging by the number of conference presentations we come across dealing with the topic – seems to be interactive whiteboards (IWBs) and their place in our classrooms and professional lives. At the IATEFL Annual Conference in Harrogate this year, as well as at a recent Learning Technologies Special Interest Group conference held in Cyprus, both of which we attended, there were numerous debates, discussions and sessions leading inexorably to what seems to be one of the major topics of conversation in our profession today: will they, won't they.... should they, shouldn't they..., use IWBs?

A complex debate has been generated by the appearance of IWBs in the classroom. The British Council, for example, has been influential in bringing IWBs to classrooms outside of the UK, introducing IWBs into classrooms in South East Asia in 2003, and expanding their use of IWBs since then. In the UK itself, huge government investment from the early 1990s has seen IWBs appearing in primary and secondary schools, and further education, on a large scale. Both are examples of a top-down implementation of technology, with large organisations (in this case, the British Council, and the British government) providing the impetus for the introduction of new tools in the classroom.

This brings up a point which we need to keep uppermost in mind in any discussion on the implementation of IWBs in education: we need to draw a distinction between IWBs as interesting technological tools for the classroom, and the obvious debate over the economical viability of implementing them for a large part of the worldwide educational community.

On the one hand it's obvious to most of us that the IWB can be an amazingly productive tool in the hands of a creative teacher – and excellent classroom work is being done using IWBs at primary, secondary and university level, as well as in the language classroom. Just Google 'IWB projects in schools', and you'll see a range of current and recent IWB projects in all sorts of school subjects.

It's equally obvious that the IWB could take off well as it uses a familiar design metaphor – the whiteboard. Indeed, nimble demonstrations of IWBs by publishers of IWB materials, and IWB suppliers at conferences usually make little mention of the use of the computer at all, approximating to some extent the 'normalisation' and invisibility that **Stephen Bax** refers to as a desirable state of affairs for ICT tools in the classroom. If ever there were a case for a 'new technology' having a good chance of making it into the mainstream, the IWB would seem to have it made. It has certainly made it in the UK, and would appear to be making it in language teaching worldwide, if the current hype is anything to go by.

Yet there are two factors which currently play against this normalisation of IWBs in the field of language teaching and they are so intrinsic to the debate that we would do well to think a little bit more deeply about them before we are tempted to jump on the IWB bandwagon.

The first factor (**materials**) is, presumably (hopefully?) a problem waiting to find a solution. Many publishers are currently developing IWB materials for popular course books, for example.



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The second, however (**finance**), is a problem with no immediate happy resolution, nor any sign of one coming round the corner in the foreseeable future.

Let's examine both in greater detail:

### **1) Materials**

Looking at the IWB materials currently available for the ELT market one cannot help but feel rather underwhelmed. Manipulating course books and workbooks transferred to the big IWB screen is simply not that interesting, and the '*wow factor*' mentioned by many proponents of IWBs is patently lacking from dull drag and drop exercises writ large, and the ability to listen to recordings which, one assumes, would sound perfectly fine on a CD player.

Sure, you can easily and quickly create tailor-made classes for your learners, store and retrieve, listen to chunks of a recording without having to rewind and other '*mini-wows*', but it just looks so much like a sledgehammer to crack a nut solution. And how long does the wow factor actually last with an IWB? How long till it simply becomes another classroom tool that the student feel they've seen a thousand times?

Of course the '*wow*' will only last so long, but in a recent research project into the use of IWBs in selected British Council centres, it was the '*wow*' that came out way ahead of any other criteria used by learners to judge them. Significantly (and bolstering the claim that IWBs seem to encourage a more '*heads up*' or lockstep approach), very few students surveyed (only three percent) made mention of having been allowed to use the IWB themselves.

### **2) Finance**

However, it's probably not so much about the technology or the materials or the lockstep approach, it's about the economics. Many, many teachers around the world have never seen an IWB, never touched one, never used one and, more significantly, are never likely to.

The cost of buying an IWB is very high indeed (a good one can be in excess of 2,000 GBP for the total package), as one needs not only the IWB itself, but a computer to connect it to, and a data projector. We also hear from IWB exponents that it's no good buying one IWB, that a centre should buy five, or eight.... This view may be right in terms of getting a significant bulk into a school, for reaching critical IWB teaching mass – but the financial outlay needed by any school for this is vast!

**Stephen Bax** would argue that early adopters will push forward IWB development, and also contribute to a lowering of prices as more are sold. This is acceptable market economics – but in this particular case this is not so clear. The IWB suppliers may be able to manufacture their own IWBs and software, but they are still mostly beholden to other manufacturers for data projectors, and to other suppliers for the laptops or desktops that drive the IWB system. Computers are getting cheaper, and data projectors too – but when will they get to an acceptable price for all but the richer countries and teaching centres to envisage buying IWBs?



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It seems to us that in all the hype, many of us are forgetting that IWBs are still tools for the privileged few, and are likely to remain that way for the foreseeable future. Perhaps international conferences should be focussing more on *real* classroom issues that affect the vast majority of teachers around the world (large classes, low salaries, minimal resources, and a long etcetera), and less on the wonders of a tool that few, in the final analysis, have access to?

### **Reference:**

**Bax, S.** [CALL Past, Present and Future](#) - accessed 15 June 2006.

Below are some links that will help you find out more about IWBs.

### **Interactive Whiteboards**

<http://www.smarttech.com> (try out the software on your own pc)

<http://www.prometheanworld.com/uk/>

### **The Debate**

And here are some links to articles that discuss the IWB, and offer links to further research:

<http://acitt.digitalbrain.com/acitt/web/resources/pubs/Journal%2002/index.htm>

[http://wik.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/Electronic\\_Whiteboards](http://wik.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/Electronic_Whiteboards)

<http://lists.becta.org.uk/pipermail/research/2004-March/000492.html>

[http://www.talkingteaching.co.uk/resources/show\\_resource.cfm?id=164](http://www.talkingteaching.co.uk/resources/show_resource.cfm?id=164)

<http://dewey.uab.es/pmarques/pdigital/all/biblio.htm>